

What is chickenpox?

Chickenpox is a contagious disease caused by a virus.

Who gets chickenpox?

In the United States, most cases occur in school-aged children. However, the risk of chickenpox is low in persons who have been vaccinated or previously infected.

What are the symptoms of chickenpox?

Initial symptoms include sudden onset of fever and feeling tired. An itchy blister-like rash, usually starting on the body, follows. New spots continue to appear for about 3-4 days. The spots scab over before falling off.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear in about two weeks.

How is chickenpox spread?

Chickenpox is spread by direct contact with the chickenpox rash before it crusts over. It is also spread through the air from an infected person's nose and throat. Another way to get chickenpox is by handling articles that are soiled by the infected person's chickenpox lesions.

How long is a person able to spread chickenpox?

A person is probably most contagious for a day or two before the rash appears and for as long as five days after the rash begins. Once scabs form over all of the spots, the person can no longer spread the disease.

Does past infection with chickenpox make a person immune?

Chickenpox generally results in lifelong immunity, although people may rarely be infected a second time. However, the virus may remain dormant and recur years or decades later as herpes zoster (shingles).

What complications are associated with chickenpox?

The most common complications of chickenpox are bacterial infections of the skin and pneumonia. Less common, but severe, complications include swelling of the brain (encephalitis), toxic shock syndrome, and joint infections. Some groups (e.g., newborns, immunocompromised persons) are at higher risk of complications.

Is there a vaccine for chickenpox?

A vaccine to protect against chickenpox is available. Varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG) may also be given to high-risk persons (e.g., newborns) if they are exposed to chickenpox to lessen the severity of illness.

What is the treatment for chickenpox?

In healthy children, chickenpox is usually a mild disease; treatment is directed at reducing the discomfort. Children with chickenpox should not receive aspirin because of the possibility of causing Reye syndrome. Antiviral medications are available but are not usually necessary - contact your doctor for more information.

Does chickenpox pose a risk to pregnant women?

If a woman gets chickenpox when she is pregnant there could be a risk to the baby. Consult your doctor if you are pregnant and have not had chickenpox.

How can chickenpox be prevented?

To avoid spreading the disease, people with chickenpox should remain home for five days after the beginning of the chickenpox rash or until the lesions become dry. Particular care should be taken to avoid exposing persons with weak immune systems.